

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20515

May 31, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write you to express our deepest concern about the imminent threat of forcible transfer faced by at least 1,000 Palestinian residents, including 500 children of the Masafer Yatta region of the occupied West Bank, an area in which Israel has declared a military firing zone—Firing Zone 918.<sup>1</sup> On May 4th, 2022, the Israeli High Court issued its final decision in a decades-long case, rejecting the residents’ petition and giving the army the greenlight to force an entire Palestinian community out of their homes at a moment’s notice. The Israeli military has already begun displacements since the ruling, demolishing nine homes and leaving 45 Palestinians homeless on May 11.<sup>2</sup> We call upon the Department of State to exert all available diplomatic pressure to ensure that Israel does not move forward with this devastating ruling.

The area where Israel established Firing Zone 918 is spread out over about 865 acres of land, where agricultural pastoral communities have lived in cave villages since the early 19th century. In the early 1980s, Israel declared this area a military firing zone, and in 1999, the Israeli army forcibly removed Palestinian residents from their homes.<sup>3</sup> In response to an emergency petition on behalf of the residents in March 2000, the Israeli High Court allowed the communities to return to their homes until the Court reached a final decision, but for the twenty-two years that followed, the Israeli military and Israeli Civil Administration prohibited Palestinians from any building or infrastructural development, regularly destroying property and confiscating new homes, roads, animal pens, water and electricity systems, and even schools and clinics.

The declaration of firing zones is a common tool used by the Israeli government to dispossess Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank, and a full 18% of the West Bank<sup>4</sup> has been taken over in this way. In the case of Firing Zone 918, the Israeli government sought to ensure Israeli territorial contiguity of the southern West Bank area with the northern Negev. In a 1981 meeting, then-Minister of Agriculture Ariel Sharon proposed the creation of Firing Zone 918,<sup>5</sup> “in order to keep these areas, which are so vital, in our

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1 See Breaking the Silence, *The 12 Villages of Masafer Yatta (Firing Zone 918) in the South Hebron Hills*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/inside/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Firing-Zone-918-Oct-15.pdf>

2 See +972 *Armed with High Court expulsion order, Israel’s bulldozers arrive in Masafer Yatta* <https://www.972mag.com/masafer-yatta-demolitions-expulsion/>

3 See The Guardian *Israeli court paves way for eviction of 1,000 Palestinians from West Bank area*, May 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/05/israeli-court-evict-1000-palestinians-west-bank-area>

4 See UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Firing zones and risk of forcible transfer*, July 2017 <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/firing-zones-and-risk-forcible-transfer>

5 See Haaretz, *40-year-old Document Reveals Ariel Sharon’s Plan to Evict 1,000 Palestinians From Their Homes*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-40-year-old-document-reveals-ariel-sharon-s-plan->

hands,” noting the importance of building firing zones in the South Hebron Hills “In light of that phenomenon—the spreading of the Arab villages on the mountainside toward the desert.”

As part of this strategy of expansion and takeover, the settlement outposts of Havat Maon, Avigayil, and Mitzpe Yair, illegal under international law, have been allowed to build into the military-declared firing zone. Settlers from these outposts have regularly harassed and attacked Palestinian residents and property, such as the violent attack on Mufagara in September 2021.<sup>6</sup>

The Israeli government has also sought in other ways to change the reality on the ground by making it difficult if not untenable for Palestinian residents to stay on their land. Before this final ruling, the army had offered unacceptable compromises, including allowing residents to live in their homes for just two months out of the year with prior coordination, or on weekends and holidays. Furthermore, the Israeli government requires Palestinians to obtain a permit from Israel in order to be able to build and maintain homes but regularly denies Palestinians these permits and refuses to approve Palestinian plans for the 12 villages of Masafer Yatta.

According to Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, “[t]he Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” The article also prohibits the “[i]ndividual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory.” Forced displacement and transfer by Israel of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta would be a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and would amount to a war crime.

We appreciate that the Biden administration has stated that human rights should be central to United States foreign policy. Accordingly, we are calling upon you to:

1. Immediately send the strongest diplomatic message possible to Israel not to expel the indigenous Palestinian residents of villages of Masafer Yatta (so-called Firing Zone 918).
2. Call on the Israeli government to end all military training exercises and building activities that will pressure or force the residents of the historic villages of Masafer Yatta to permanently or temporarily leave their homes, or that would otherwise make life unlivable.
3. Publicly state that any action by the Israeli government to forcibly transfer Palestinian residents of Masafer Yatta would be a war crime in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.
4. If Israel proceeds with its plans to forcibly displace the indigenous Palestinian residents, the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Israel should immediately, pursuant to the oversight and accountability required by the Leahy Law and the Arms Export and Controls Act, send observers to document the mass transfer, including details of the military units involved in these operations and the use of any U.S. weapons.

We appreciate your urgent attention to the dire situation in Masafer Yatta in the occupied West Bank. We look forward to your earliest possible reply and working with you to uphold human rights.

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[to-expel-1-000-palestinians-1.9057519](mailto:to-expel-1-000-palestinians-1.9057519)

<sup>6</sup> See Associated Press, *In Brazen Attack by Settlers, Palestinians See Larger Threat*, October 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/1184890addc0a58a9075a8fc99474944>

Sincerely,



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CORI BUSH  
Member of Congress

*André Carson*

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André Carson  
Member of Congress



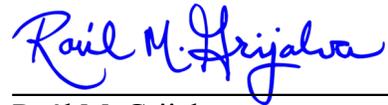
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Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress



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Jésús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress



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Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



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Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress



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Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress



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Betty McCollum  
Member of Congress



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Marie Newman  
Member of Congress



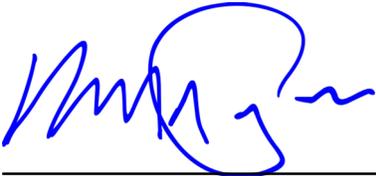
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress



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Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress



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Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress



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Ayanna Pressley  
Member of Congress



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Mark Takano  
Member of Congress



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Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress